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Journal of European Studies
2023, Vol. 53(1) 53–69
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DOI: 10.1177/00472441221141976
journals.sagepub.com/home/jes



# The vicissitudes of bilingualism and plurilingualism in the European Union

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## Abstract

Starting with the early twentieth century, the shifts in what languages mainland Europeans have as additional languages are described and analysed. Historical events, such as World War II, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, as well as the ramifications of globalization, are taken into consideration, as are the implications of Brexit for the role English maintains as Europe's primary universal language. Declines in French, German and Russian as the first additional language are observed. Comparisons are made of the resources required for a language to challenge English as Europe's primary lingua franca. It is found that the patterns which emerge over time, with few exceptions, result in the increased importance of English in all of the Member States of the European Union. Moreover, the rise of L2 English in the European Union has caused mainland Europeans to be more likely to become bilingual rather than plurilingual, something contrary to European Union policy.

## Keywords

bilingualism, Brexit, Euro-English, European English, monolingualism, plurilingualism

A number of developments have taken place which have had an impact on what additional languages are acquired in Europe, among them the decline of German as an L2 following the end of hostilities in 1945, the weakening of French in the same respect which has continued to this day, the rise and fall of Russian as an L2 in eastern Europe, which started, again, after 1945 and ended in the early 1990s with the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the increased use of English as an L2 across mainland Europe that gathered momentum nearly 100 years ago and has since made considerable gains, first with the boost English received from the allied victory in the War and again in the last 30 years or so as a result of globalization (Glück, 2014; Gonçalves et al., 2018; Schröder, 2018; van Els, 2005). Two additional aspects of the

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basis for Europeans learning additional languages, the persistence of English to maintain its role as the prominent mainland European lingua franca despite Brexit and the replacement of French by English as the *de facto* working language of the European Union (EU), are especially important because they both contribute to processes which support the possibility of English becoming a mainland-European second language, with its own particular norms for grammar, pronunciation and lexical use, among the citizens of the EU. Consequently, the aim of this article is to illustrate how the changes in the patterns of additional-language acquisition result in the increased utility, spread and nativization of English in the mainland European context, as well as to the loss of status and domain for practically all the other autochthonous European languages.

Changes have taken place, not only in what language or languages are taught, and in what order they are acquired, but also in the forms and functions which additional languages have in education, in the workplace, as well as in the private sphere. English has not only taken over the traditional role French, German and Russian previously maintained as the first additional language in many Member States of the EU, it has also come to dominate an increasing number of domains as it consolidates its position as mainland Europe's primary universal language. The success of Anglo-American culture, advances made in computer science and in Internet-based technologies, as well as the national security ramifications of World War II, with the America commitment to both defend and develop western Europe, set the stage for English to dominate not only Europe but also the entire world in the post-Cold War era.

## The rise of bilingualism

There is growing evidence that the upswing in the utility of English has to a considerable extent caused many citizens of the EU to be complacent with their status as bilinguals (see Hoffmann, 2000; van Oostendorp, 2012). No longer solely acquired for interaction with native speakers, English is the first choice among mainland Europeans primarily because of its usefulness as a lingua franca locally, regionally across Europe and internationally, where English eases communication between Europeans and others on a global scale. Plurilingualism has apparently become less attractive because many people now feel that knowing English is sufficient to access and participate in Europeanization and globalization, and it would seem to be the case, as well, that many young people in mainland Europe are not willing to devote the time and effort required to learn a third language. As observed by van Oostendorp (2012: 252) about the Netherlands,

> There are several indications that the Dutch are moving from being a traditionally multilingual population, priding themselves on their knowledge of many foreign languages, to being bilingual, priding themselves on their knowledge of English.

Note as well that programmes funded by the EU to further plurilingualism, such as Erasmus +, have not only failed to produce any tangible results, they have actually acted to promote bilingualism in that they have indirectly caused considerable resources to be delegated to English, which substantiates the importance of English and increases the extent of exposure students have to that specific medium. In turn, the gains being made

by English impact negatively on the vitality of autochthonous languages which in the not-so-distant past were pursued by mainland Europeans eager to acquire additional languages. These results of linguistic Anglo-Americanization, domain loss and large-scale acceptance of new loans, can be traced in languages throughout the world.

## Multilingualism/plurilingualism and European unification

Instead of opting for the creation of the monolingual nation state (Blackledge, 2000), an objective prevalent in Europe in the nineteenth century when there was a firm belief in the advantages of monoculturalization and linguistic uniformity, it is apparent that the leaders of the EU see the protection of the rich linguistic ecology of Europe to be an important aspect of European unification, and for this reason have passed several resolutions intended to protect indigenous languages. The call for the promotion of plurilingualism, an integral component of such support, became official policy with the ratification of the 'Council Resolution of 21 November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism'. According to the Commission,

> Languages unite people, render other countries and their cultures accessible, and strengthen intercultural understanding. Foreign language skills play a vital role in enhancing employability and mobility. Multilingualism also improves the competitiveness of the EU economy. (Council Resolution of 21 November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism)

Knowing three languages, moreover, has practical benefits, such as strengthening democracy and respect for democratic institutions. EU language policy also includes (1) the understanding that every Member State has one language which operates as an official EU language, with citizens having the right to communicate with the Union in one of the official languages, (2) the designation of three 'procedural' or 'working languages', English, French and German and (3) the protection of lesser-used, minority, and endangered languages. Support is also given to the translation and interpretation services, which includes the translation of treaties and other legal documentation (see Leal, 2021; Studer et al., 2008).

## Bilingualism, plurilingualism and multilingualism

Before continuing, however, it would be prudent to define some key terminology. The term *monolingual* is used to describe people who for all intent and purpose have one language. In general, for Europe, we find greater numbers of monolingual people among speakers of larger European languages, such as English, French, Italian and Spanish, and in eastern Europe among those who have Slavic languages (but not among speakers of Latvian and Lithuanian), while it is uncommon in northern Europe (see *Eurostat* n.d.-a). For Scandinavia, for example, it is now the case that less than 5 percent of the populations of Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are monolingual. Monolingualism is also uncommon among native speakers of Dutch and German (for the Netherlands, see van Oostendorp, 2012). As reported by Borgwaldt (2014: 26) with statistics from the European Commission from 2006, '67% of Germans claimed to be able to conduct a

conversation in at least one foreign language apart from their mother tongue, and 27% claimed to be able speak at least two languages other than their mother tongue'.

The term *lesser-used languages* refers here to indigenous European languages with relatively few native speakers, such as Estonian (1.1 million), Maltese (500 000) and Luxembourgish (300 000). It is also possible to include speech communities which, in comparison to larger European languages such as French, German, Italian and Spanish, have less formidable backing, such as Czech (10.7 million), Croatian (4 million) and Danish (5.8 million). *Minority languages* are languages spoken by ethnic minorities within Member States, such as Catalan (9 million). *Endangered languages* are those lesser-used and minority languages which have declining numbers of native speakers, such as Sámi, a language spoken by an ethnic minority residing in northern Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden, and Mirandese, spoken in northern Portugal. Note moreover that users of lesser-used, minority, and endangered languages are often bilingual or plurilingual, seeing as there is a need to have a command of the majority language of the Member State, as well as the expectation to acquire proficiency in English when attending school.

Bloomfield (1933: 56), in defining bilingualism as 'native-like control of two languages', addresses a competence which often begins in the home in early childhood. But today most mainland Europeans acquire competence in the English medium through exposure to English on the Internet, through television and radio broadcasting, by watching films, as well as through classroom instruction. Here, bilingual status in the mother tongue plus English can perhaps be best described as the ability to use English freely in social interaction without having to continuously struggle to make oneself understood. This second, more general definition of bilingualism is what is operative in the discussion presented here. It indicates the ability to communicate freely in the English medium but does not necessarily indicate that native-like proficiency has been achieved. What is most common for the indigenous populations of the EU is that additional languages are taught in school with one language, the mother tongue, prevalent in the home and the local community, and the additional language acquired for use in specific domains such as in education, when travelling, when reading and watching English-medium media, and, later in life, in the workplace. With English, the outcomes are quite encouraging, with more than 175 million people across mainland Europe capable of carrying on discussions in English without difficulty (European Commission, 2012).

For those who can speak three languages, this can be indicated by the term *multilingual*, or *plurilingual* (the latter, like the term *Member State*, is a European English innovation and not found in Inner Circle varieties). In some discussions, the term *tri-lingual* is used to indicate competence in three languages. At the European Conference on Plurilingualism–Paris – 24/25 November 2005, the terms *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism* were given the following definition: '[W]e agree to use the term "plurilingualism" to mean the use of several languages by an individual and the term "multilingualism" to mean the coexistence of several languages within a given social group'. Thus, one can define plurilingualism as 'the study of individual's repertoires and agency in several languages' (Moore and Gajo, 2009: 138), while multilingualism designates how we define the coexistence of differing languages within communities and indeed within

nation states. For some, however, multilingualism can refer to both individual performance and the linguistic profile of the community or the state.

In mainland Europe, plurilingualism is more commonly found in the Baltic countries, in Scandinavia, in the Benelux countries and in Switzerland, in border regions throughout central Europe, where major universities are located, as well as in Europe's capital cities. Moreover, speakers of minority languages more commonly have additional languages. There are, as well, Member States such as Belgium, Finland, Luxembourg and Spain, which are clearly multilingual in the sense that more than one substantial indigenous native-tongue speech community can be found within the country. Moreover, a considerable number of Member States are essentially multilingual in that they have large speech communities comprised of people from the Middle East and North Africa, with, for example, Arabic, Farsi, Somali and Oromo. Here, for practical reasons, members of such immigrant families in the EU become plurilingual in that they have their non-European heritage language, the language of their host country and English. In this discussion, however, the central concern is with the historical development of indigenous European languages acquired as an L2 or L3.

## Prior to 1940

What was commonplace for mainland Europe up until 1940 was that those who were proficient in two or three languages more often than not had French or German as their L2. While French and German are still present in the repertoire of many people with plurilingual competence, these languages are no longer the first acquired language for most bilingual and multilingual people in the EU. English, which is a mandatory subject in all school systems in the EU, maintains this position, especially for young people but also for many adults. We have, moreover, noted gains in the teaching and learning of Spanish, and in recent years, slight declines in French and German. As noted by Alexander Resnick (2018), 'French has been on a long decline in the EU over the last few decades'. German, while also waning in western Europe among school-goers, has some advances made in eastern Europe among migrant workers which is not the case for French. Marcu et al. (2018: 4), report, in respect to the free movement of labour from eastern Europe, that 'Germany and the United Kingdom are mostly targeted by labor immigrants'. French has a weak position throughout eastern Europe, as well as across the Baltic countries and Scandinavia, and is not increasing to any considerable extent as an L2 anywhere in Europe. As such, the traditional additional languages, French and German, are taking a back seat to two languages, English and Spanish. Note as well that while there is a great deal of interest in acquiring skills in English, motivation to learn other languages is lacklustre at best and is not showing any signs of changing in this respect. While nearly 100 percent of children in school in the EU are studying English, the figures for French and German are only a fraction of that number. In statistics for 2019, for example, for all EU children in upper secondary general education, Spanish was studied by 26.4 percent of school-goers, French by 21.8 percent and German by 20.3 percent (*Eurostat* n.d.-b).

In the United Kingdom, while French was the most pursued foreign language, with little interest shown to German, few there succeed in acquiring oral proficiency in that medium, and German, which was the traditional second additional language targeted by

school-goers in the United Kingdom, like French, has now been surpassed by Spanish (RLI, 2021). Moreover, the indigenous peoples of the British Isles have the highest percentage of monolingualism in Europe, which is increasing rather than decreasing as the United Kingdom attempts to live up to its global aspirations. Note moreover that the UK withdrawal from the Erasmus+ programmes will undoubtedly result in even fewer numbers of UK citizens attaining competence in additional languages (see Zotti, 2021). As reported by the BBC in 2019 by Branwen Jeffreys (2019): 'While German and French . . . have really dropped away at [the] GCSE level, there has been a noticeable surge in some others, such as Spanish and Mandarin' (at present only a small number of learners become fluent in Spanish and Mandarin in the United Kingdom). A similar decline in French and German, and an increase in Spanish, in also taking place in the Republic of Ireland, where approximately half the population is bilingual or multilingual (*Eurostat* n.d.-c).

## Europe in four geographical perspectives

We can roughly divide Europe into four somewhat overlapping regions: (1) the Germanic nation states which encompass the Scandinavian countries, Austria, Germany, the Benelux nation states where Germanic languages are spoken and Switzerland where Swiss German is spoken; (2) eastern Europe, where the majority of languages are Slavic, which includes the Baltic states and previous Warsaw Pact countries, the former Yugoslavia, as well as where Daco-Romance languages are spoken and (3) Romance Europe, which includes all of the countries which have Latin-based languages (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc.), including the French-speaking regions of Switzerland. It is also possible to denote (4) western Europe, which in this discussion encompasses Member States which were in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization during the Cold War, as well as Austria, Finland, the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland. Each of these nation states has a unique history when it comes to the acquisition of additional languages. Note that there are countries which do not fit neatly into this taxonomy because of the uniqueness of their majority language, such as Greece, and other nation states which are not included for geopolitical reasons, such as Russia and the Ukraine, where native speakers of Russian in Russia and Russian and Ukrainian in Ukraine, like native speakers of English in the United Kingdom, are notoriously monolingual (Baranova and Fedorova, 2020).

## Northern and eastern Europe

Let us begin with northern and eastern Europe. While it is true that French was taught in schools across Scandinavia in the nineteenth century, when secondary school at that time was primarily reserved for children of the aristocracy and the upper classes, German became more fashionable in the early decades of the twentieth century (see Cabau-Lampa, 2005). In the Netherlands both French and German were popular additional languages. Keep in mind that in Finland, school-goers were expected to have attained some level of proficiency in Swedish, which often meant that French or German were acquired as a third language. Swedish was compulsory for all school-goers. After Finland became

a member of the EU in 1995 interest in Swedish waned considerably and many people in Finland made English their first priority, despite the fact that Swedish continued to be a mandatory subject in school (see Latomaa and Nuolijärvi, 2002). As noted by Björklund et al. (2013: 197), 'The diminishing presence of the Swedish language in Finnish society has, in turn, impacted on Finnish-speaking students' motivation and opportunities to learn Swedish'. Across Europe, the growing importance of English undermines other tongues.

Things were different across the water in the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where German was in fashion before the war and was then replaced by Russian during the period of Soviet domination. Another shift took place after 1991 when those who were native speakers of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian turned to English and stopped learning Russian, while the sizable population of native speakers of Russian in these countries continued to keep Russian operative (and if and when bi- or plurilingualism is targeted, native Russian speakers in the Baltic countries invariably acquire the majority language of the Member State in which they reside, followed by English or German, and then, in exceptional cases, French; see Ozolins, 2003; Toomet, 2011). For native speakers of the indigenous languages of the Baltic states, this pattern, of having first an interest in German, and for some a desire to acquire French, and then, after the war, of turning to Russian, with little state support to learn English, French or German, was characteristic for eastern Europe during the Cold War as was the learning of English after 1991 (see Pavlenko, 2003).

Consequently, prior to 1945, there were basically three profiles for people in the north and in the east. One was to maintain monolingual status. Another was to have proficiency in two languages. As an example, there has been a long-standing tradition of bilingualism in Finland, where proficiency in Finnish and Swedish was and is still to some extent the norm for many people. For the most part, however, those in northern and eastern Europe with bilingual status often had German as their L2. The third profile, plurilingualism, was less widespread than bilingualism, and more common among those with education at the upper secondary and tertiary levels. The pattern throughout eastern Europe was that many people had their mother tongues plus German, and here, if an additional language was targeted it was often the language of a neighbouring country, French or Russian (see Fodor and Peluau, 2004). In the north, plurilingualism most often included the mother tongue plus German and French, and for some, English. Prior to 1945, Scandinavians did not learn any other languages in any significant numbers.

## Western Europe

For those with education living in western Europe, French or German were the given alternatives up until the 1950s, when a shift to having English as the first additional language began to gather momentum. It has never been the case that western Europeans acquire Russian or any other eastern European language to any substantial extent. In the Benelux countries, Switzerland and parts of Germany and Austria, both bilingualism and plurilingualism were and are still more common than monolingualism. Monolingualism can be more readily found in the Romance countries of southern Europe. For Italy, Statista figures indicated that 58% of the population were monolingual between 2007

and 2016 (Statista, 2022); for France, 40 percent of the population is monolingual (*Eurostat* n.d.-c) and for Spain 45 percent (*Eurostat* n.d.-c). Those living in regions in Spain where Catalan is spoken, which is undergoing processes of cultural and linguistic revitalization, for example, are an exception to this rule. Most speakers of Catalan also have Spanish, so the learning of an additional language, such as English or French, would be indicative of plurilingualism. Other speakers of minority languages in Spain, among them Aranease, Valencian and Galician, have similar linguistic profiles. For the most part, however, the greatest concentration of plurilingualism is in central Europe, and for bilingualism, we have the Nordic countries and the Baltic states, with monolingualism more prevalent among the former Warsaw Pact countries and in the south. As reported by Michel et al. (2021: 171), for the Netherlands, 'German and French show a steady decline from almost 60% and 30% in 1980 to 32% and 16% for German and French, respectively'. This is a common trend across mainland Europe, where the learning of both French and German have suffered because of the increasing interest in investing in the English medium as well as in Spanish.

## Eastern Europe

A lack of economic prosperity, as well as difficulties maintaining quality school education, is the reason why the learning of additional languages is less successful in eastern Europe. As to the south of Europe, one reason why there are difficulties acquiring additional languages is that three of the four largest EU mother tongues, French, Italian and Spanish, are located there. Another Romance language, Portuguese, has relatively few native speakers in Europe (10 million), but belongs to a much larger, chiefly monolingual speech community (*circa* 230 million native speakers; see Massini-Cagliari, 2004). On the outskirts of Europe, and sharing a border only with Spain, the motivation of Portuguese people who do not immigrate to other European countries to acquire additional languages is less when compared with EU citizens who are located more centrally in Europe, and consequently, like the other Member States where a Romance language is the majority tongue, many people in Portugal have only maintained proficiency in their native language (with roughly 30% monolingual, *Eurostat* n.d.-c). At the same time, we are witnessing an increase in bilingualism among the younger generation (because of increases in proficiency in English), and this is true in all of the Member States where Romance languages are majority languages.

## Lesser used languages

Lesser-used languages are commonly found in the north and east of Europe. For many in these regions, English is found to be of greater value because it can be used locally, regionally and internationally, and this is undoubtedly one of the reasons why it is now so important that people in these parts of Europe can use their English in their dealings with the EU, and not be coerced into conducting business in other major European languages. Already having considerable skills in English, the call that they make further investments to acquire other languages to such an extent that they can operate on an even footing with native speakers of such languages within the EU apparatus is not appealing

and is for this reason rejected as an alternative to having English as the primary EU working language (see Ammon, 2006).

## Advantages in Germanic regions

There is another differentiation which can be made in the EU, and that is the greater propensity for people to know two or more languages in the Nordic countries, the Baltic countries and in those central European countries which have Germanic-based languages. The rest of Europe is below two languages on average. The average is below two languages in all of the eastern European Member States (except the Baltic countries), all of southern Europe, and the British Isles. One explanation for greater levels of proficiency in additional languages across northern Europe, and in those regions of central Europe where Germanic languages are spoken, is that Member States there have higher living standards when compared with the EU average (with the exception of France), and also maintain high standards in their language education programmes, while eastern European countries, from Poland to Bulgaria, are less economically prosperous and have fewer qualified language teachers (which to a lesser extent is also true for those Member States with a Romance language as the majority tongue). As to those Member States in the south where Romance languages are spoken, the explanation there is also related to the fact that these are large speech communities.

The pattern which can be observed is in fact extraordinary. In all cases where we have seen a decline in a language traditionally acquired as the first additional language, German in the north and east and later Russian in the east, French throughout Europe, and indeed Swedish in Finland, we see these languages replaced in such capacities by English. Across western Europe, while it has always been the tradition to acquire French or German, what we now see is that English has priority in this respect, with school children working first to learn English, and after English, if they choose to continue learning languages, turning to one of the other major European languages, now most often Spanish but also either French or German. In the south as well, English is the first additional language for the majority of school-goers. The result has been that bilingualism is becoming deeply rooted today when compared with the generation of people over the age of 65 years, and this bilingualism is overwhelmingly the mother tongue plus English. In the near future it will be rare for a citizen of the EU to be monolingual or without competence in English.

## Language teaching and learning in the EU

What separates mainland Europe from many other regions throughout the world is not only that bilingualism and multilingualism are commonplace there but also that language skills, for a large segment of the population, are acquired formally in educational establishments under the guidance of trained specialists. Qualified language practitioners are more commonly found in those EU Member States with higher standards of living, such as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden, and less commonly found in Member States in eastern and southern Europe with lower standards of living (see Holmqvist, 2019). In the EU in general, pupils not

only learn to speak additional languages, they are also encouraged to master the written medium and many are successful in this endeavour. Nowhere else do we find so many people skilled in the speaking and writing of additional languages. The EU is unique in this respect. In other parts of the world, learning a language often means acquiring verbal skills, and there is less success when it comes to writing. Moreover, in developed nation states where English is the majority language–Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States, and in Asia, in developed countries like China, Japan and South Korea, as well as in countries in South America such as Brazil–it is far more common to be monolingual. Note as well that for those studying English in China, relatively few master the spoken medium, despite having spent several years receiving English instruction.

In all of the above-mentioned nation states, the percentage of people who are plurilingual is lower in comparison to the EU. 'In 2016 . . . just over one fifth (21.0%) knew two foreign languages' (Katsarova, 2022). Note that current statistics would indicate a higher percentage seeing as the 1916 figures include the United Kingdom. In the United States, for example, approximately 17 percent of the population is multilingual, a statistic which primarily reflects the linguistic profiles of people of Hispanic and Asian heritage, as well as new arrivals from throughout the world (*Indicator* V-08a, 2021). For Japan, where the most common language pursued in education is English, Serena Lai (2017) notes that 'less than 10% of Japanese have professional working proficiency in English'. For Brazil, Massini-Cagliari (2004: 3) has reported that 'almost the total population is constituted of monolingual Portuguese speakers, and the vast majority of them will never learn a second language'.

## Erasmus+ and plurilingualism

Erasmus+ is an important component of the campaign to encourage citizens of the EU to have three languages. This is made clear in a statement issued by the Commission: '[T]he Erasmus+ programme offers opportunities to young people to hone their language skills by engaging in learning and training abroad, and by supporting vocational and educational mobility' (EU Commission, n.d.). Unfortunately, however, what is taking place in the Erasmus + educational programmes is that colleges and universities are offering courses in the English medium as a way to attract students and as such increase revenues. Students, learning English in their own school systems and attaining adequate levels of proficiency before they leave home, study in the Erasmus+ programmes without having to learn the language of the countries they visit. Consequently, for many international students, Erasmus+ is not supporting the acquisition of a third language to any noticeable extent but is rather providing the English language with greater resources and as such validating the understanding that in Europe one does not need to have more than one's native tongue plus English.

This is the general trend at the moment. Everyone across mainland Europe, while at school, is expected to learn English, and with this competence, there is little motivation to continue to do the work required to acquire a third language. The manner in which Erasmus+ is designed substantiates this exclusivity of the English medium. The Erasmus+ programmes do not lead to better prospects for the advancement of

plurilingualism but more to an order where English is the dominant language in a growing number of domains. This is in direct contradiction to the intentions of the EU language policy. As Lasagabaster (2015: 116) notes,

> [A]lthough many European higher education institutions have multilingualism as one of their main language policy objectives, English is making this aim unviable due to its adverse effect not only upon other foreign languages, but also upon national languages.

This is further substantiated by the work of Robert Philipson, who, in a number of publications has adamantly argued for great awareness of how *Englishization* impacts on other languages (see Phillipson, 1992, 2003, 2015).

## The rise of bilingualism

Consequently, while one can now ascertain that the effort to encourage the citizens of the EU to be plurilingual has not resulted in an increase in the acquisition of a third language to any significant extent, what is encouraging is that the number of people with proficiency in an additional language is increasing, which makes the next step, the acquisition of one more language, within relatively easy reach. What needs to be done now to better support plurilingualism is to come to an understanding of the role English plays in the current trend to be content with only having one additional language. More specifically, what responsibility does the use of English as the medium of instruction in colleges and universities across mainland Europe have in influencing the citizens of the EU to be content with their bilingualism? (see Ammon, 2001). How can we reverse this trend? Perhaps the best way to achieve success in the promotion of plurilingualism in the EU is to divert resources from English to other indigenous mainland European languages, especially lesser used, minority and endangered languages. It would, moreover, be beneficial if the EU initiated reforms of the Erasmus+ programmes so that greater numbers of students are required to study in the host-country language rather than in the English medium (for Catalan, see Garrett and Balsà, 2014).

## The EU lingua franca

The role English now maintains as the primary mainland European lingua franca, while unfortunately undermining the utility of other European languages, provides the EU with several unique opportunities. For one, it offers people a level playing field, where communication takes place on equal terms, seeing as everyone, with few exceptions, is communicating in an L2 (approximately 1% of the EU population are native speakers of English, and they are primarily found in the Republic of Ireland). This is not possible, for example, with French, where native speakers in France, Belgium, Luxembourg and elsewhere, who are a speech community over 70 million strong, would enjoy privileges while others, struggling with their L3 proficiency in French, would be at a disadvantage. There are simply not enough non-native speakers with proficiency in any EU language, with the exception of English, which would allow them to operate smoothly as the primary lingua franca of the EU. As the Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs (2022) duly notes,

> Any attempt by one of the remaining larger member states to impose its own national language on the EU is doomed to meet fierce and decisive resistance. It would amount to trying to recreate an injustice the removal of which was one of the few benefits Brexit brought us.

Keep in mind, moreover, that replacing English with another European language would require a massive and costly educational campaign, and it would take many years as well before adequate levels of proficiency were achieved.

We must also take into consideration the probability that many people may very well reject the notion that English is no longer the first language of the Union, and in so doing refuse to learn French or German, or any other language for that matter. They would likely argue that the advantages which English maintains as a language of wider communication are in line with Europe's ambition to take a leading role in globalization, and there, as well, English is the acknowledged medium for cross-cultural communication. For Europeans, learning English kills two birds with one stone, a benefit no other language can offer. In learning English Europeans not only acquire their primary regional lingua franca, they also gain access to globalization.

## Addressing the need to support English language teaching

Legitimizing English as the primary European lingua franca entails acknowledging the imbalance between the quality of English language instruction in various parts of the Union. As to those school systems across eastern and southern Europe where success rates are less impressive when compared with what is achieved, for example, in Scandinavia and in the Netherlands, some additional investment in language education is needed. While this can only take place where there is approval at the Member State level, it is time now for the EU to step in and contribute to the effort underway in eastern and southern Europe to improve the quality of English language instruction in schools. It is not in the best interests of the Union to have so many children and adolescents attending classes with inadequate resources. Despite any difficulties which may be encountered in the effort to improve the quality of instruction in EU schools, when comparing the financing needed to better facilitate the teaching and learning of a universal lingua franca for the EU, English requires far less investment when compared with all the alternatives, (see Mac Giolla Chríost and Bonotti, 2018). Note as well that compared with other languages, intrinsic motivation is high among learners of English, which makes supporting English as a school subject more viable because it promises better outcomes (see Gardner, 1985, 1988; Hamidah et al., 2017).

## Standards for the EU

Consequently, with backing for English as the lingua franca of the EU, and the required investments made to establish greater equality in the instruction of English across mainland Europe, the question that arises is the following: which English? The time has now come for the citizens of the EU to support the call for the recognition of their own rendition of the language, and in so doing distance themselves from the belief that L2 users across Europe should attempt to mimic idealized native speakers of standard American

and standard British English to be deemed proficient users of the tongue. For the citizens of the EU, bilingualism can be something more. Maybe the citizens of the EU would be better off if they perceived their own usage to be a legitimate second-language variety. This could act as a foundation for the formation of European identity in and through a lingua franca and as such bring the notion of identity to English language teaching and learning. Instead of surveying information about the United States and England in their English classes, school-goers would do better to train at being able to explain and discuss Europe in the English medium, its history, cultures, traditions and institutions. Learning about the EU, its political structure and aims, is more useful for EU citizens as opposed to gaining a better understanding of the American and British systems. In fact, presenting English in the classroom as a mainland European enterprise opens up a number of opportunities. It facilitates the celebration of diversity and inclusion, central tenants in EU political ideology. It also positions competence in a logical taxonomy, where fluency can be seen as having utility in local, regional and international respects.

The initiation of work required to recognize English as a mainland European language, and as such standardize a European norm for use in the EU apparatus as well as in school education, would not only support this call for linking the lingua franca to the formation of European identity, it would also make acquiring oral proficiency in English less burdensome for those who are not interested in attaining near-native or native oral proficiency in a stylized Inner Circle variety. Learning English in schools which promote the acquisition of prestigious native-speaker accents requires more time and effort when compared with educational programmes which make provisions for the learning of European English. In the ideology of European English, regional identity markers such as the French, German or Dutch accents are found to be both natural and acceptable. At the same time, learners could target native-speaker norms if they so desire, which would mean that the legitimization of European English could be seen as a complement to the choices made available to learners rather than as a replacement of the current basis for English language teaching and learning. As such, providing such choices allows teachers opportunities to actively promote ‘learner centered learning’.

## Conclusion

Seeing as it is already the case that those living and working in the EU are using English more than any other language, it would be more expedient if the EU recognized the fact that English is the primary lingua franca of the EU (see Ammon, 2006). Plurilingualism, for the majority of the peoples of the EU, would imply learning a third language after one’s mother tongue and English. This approach is a more realistic way forward. In the post-Brexit era, with the United Kingdom out of the union, the citizens of the EU are given a unique opportunity to have a universal language which has a sufficient L2 speaker base, is for the most part without native speakers and, moreover, is in sync with the need to communicate with people throughout the world. Unfortunately, however, this predominance of English negatively affects the vitality of other indigenous European languages. Consequently, if we are to see a more diversified plurilingualism emerge in

the EU in the post-Brexit era, measures need to be taken by the EU leadership to support the acquisition of languages other than English, otherwise what we will most likely see going forward, when it comes to acquiring additional languages in the EU, is a continuation of the dominance of English and a decline in the teaching and learning of other languages.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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